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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BEIRUT 000324

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/WERNER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [KPAL](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: SINIORA ON END TO CABINET BOYCOTT,
HIZBALLAH ACTION, UNIIIC AND HARIRI TRIAL, HAMAS, AND
BY-ELECTIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 320

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 268

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a 2/4 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora claimed that he and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri had orchestrated the end of the Shia cabinet boycott by cornering Hizballah publicly. There is no private and no written deal, Siniora insisted, noting that he fully expected Hizballah to provoke other crises soon. Regretting that he had lost any potential diplomatic initiative after Israel's killing of a Lebanese shepherd, the PM expressed dismay over Hizballah's 2/3 Blue Line violations. Aware that there would now be no UNSC action despite the GOL request (ref a), he asked for U.S. help in curbing Israeli overflights. Asked about the UNIIIC, Siniora noted that he was concerned that UNIIIC Chief Brammertz, a "clinical" man, seemed to be questioning all work that preceded him. Siniora revealed that, as follow-up to the UN/OLA mission (ref b), the 2/2 cabinet meeting had discussed modalities for an international tribunal. Siniora rejected the Lockerbie model. On 2/6, Siniora planned to meet with Minister of Justice Rizk to decide who to send to UN headquarters to continue discussions on the modalities for the tribunal. On the impact in Lebanon of Hamas' electoral victory, Siniora predicted that Hamas, a minor player in Lebanon, would now expand here. His deeper concern was that Iran would increase its growing influence to include the Palestinian territories. As for the Lebanese parliamentary elections in Baabda-Aley, Siniora advocated a single compromise candidate, backed by the Aoun and March 14 blocs, to prevent the elections from elevating tensions further in Lebanon or leading to violence. (Note: This meeting took place before the 2/5 riots in Beirut, covered septel. End note.) End summary.

HIZBALLAH CORNERED; NO SECRET DEAL
TO BRING SHIA BACK INTO CABINET

[1](#)2. (C) Receiving the Ambassador in his private apartment on 2/4, Siniora -- his characteristic optimism and good humor restored -- insisted that he had made no private deals with Hizballah and Amal to end, after seven weeks, the cabinet boycott by the five Shia ministers that began on December 12. Nor did he revive his controversial written text, as neither the March 14 majority nor Hizballah liked it. Nor did the international community, the Ambassador reminded the PM. The

solution to the cabinet boycott, Siniora explained, emerged in part out of a meeting he had with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri just prior to the 2/2 parliament session. Berri insisted that the two of them had to solve the crisis that day; in Berri's view, the cabinet split had already gone on for too long. The Speaker told the PM that, if he would just say in front of the parliament that Hizballah is not a militia, he would see that the five Shia ministers returned to the cabinet. Siniora told Berri that he had no authority to say those words, given opposition from his own backers and allies. After an increasingly heated debate with an unbudging Siniora, Berri then opened the parliamentary session in an annoyed and worried mood.

13. (C) Siniora said that, as he sat in the parliament session listening to the fiery speech of Hizballah deputy Ali Ammar condemning Israel and the Siniora cabinet in equal doses, he suddenly thought of a potential solution. While he had no authority to say that Hizballah was not a militia, he could repeat what his own cabinet statement as well as other Lebanese politicians continually say, that Hizballah is a resistance. Leaving the word "militia" out, he jotted down a formula on a notebook, reading it out to the parliament in a speech following Ammar's. "We have never called, and will never call, the resistance by any other name but the resistance, until our national lands are liberated," Siniora repeated to the Ambassador, paraphrasing his parliamentary remarks. This, Siniora said, avoided a split with Walid Jumblatt, stayed within the parameters he received from Sa'ad Hariri, and established a marker that the resistance had only one purpose, liberation of occupied Lebanese lands, "not the conquest of Jerusalem or the end to Israeli aggressions."

14. (C) In the parliament session, Berri listened to Siniora intently, the PM continued. When the PM paused after his

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resistance lines, Berri ostentatiously stood and applauded, with his own Amal bloc immediately joining in. Hizballah deputies were left with an uncomfortable choice, of preserving Shia unity by applauding a PM whom Hizballah leaders had continually denounced, or maintaining their boycott at the expense of Shia unity. They choose Shia unity. The real key to the cabinet reunification, Siniora said, was Berri's commitment to find a way to end the boycott and thus the risk Berri took in offering his spontaneous ovation. While Siniora, by omitting the word "militia," gave him less than he wanted, Berri saw a face-saving exit.

15. (C) The Ambassador told Siniora that, while the USG would probably not comment publicly on his parliament statement, we did not like it. Siniora should not presume that we will stop pursuing implementation of UNSCR 1559. Siniora said that he understood and asked the Ambassador what he would tell the ubiquitous Lebanese press if someone asked for comment on his statement to parliament. The Ambassador said that he would blandly welcome the reunification of the cabinet and express hope that essential work on reform and appointments would resume. "Good," Siniora said; "that's perfect. Don't say more."

HIZBALLAH TO MAKE TROUBLE AGAIN,
BUT PROBABLY BY DIFFERENT MEANS

16. (C) The Ambassador asked Siniora how long he expected the Shia ministers to stay in the cabinet before they engineered another destructive walk-out. Siniora said that he did not think that the ministers would do so readily again, for they know that they lost public support because of the boycott. But the cabinet indeed has many difficult issues to discuss, and Hizballah will make trouble, using a variety of methods. Hizballah "does not want us to succeed," Siniora said, and might even resort to violent and frightening street protests over social issues.

NO LINKAGE BETWEEN BLUE LINE ACTION
AND CABINET REUNIFICATION

¶17. (C) Noting that the Shia ministers had re-entered the cabinet at a much lower price than they had been seeking (e.g., a written, signed document stating Hizballah was not a militia) and that Siniora insisted there was no private deal, the Ambassador asked if there was a linkage between the cabinet reunification and the 2/3 Blue Line action by Hizballah. Was Hizballah, already determined to retaliate for the 2/1 killing by Israel of a Lebanese boy, looking for cabinet cover? Siniora said that he did not believe there was such a linkage, "although you can never tell for sure."

SINIORA REJECTS THEORY THAT NASRALLAH
ALSO SURPRISED BY BLUE LINE ACTION

¶18. (C) The Ambassador cautioned Siniora that, after Hizballah had initiated hostilities across the Blue Line on 2/3, it was unlikely that the UNSC would react positively to the Lebanese request (ref a) that the Israeli killing of Ibrahim Rahil on Lebanese territory be discussed. Siniora said that he understood that Hizballah had "destroyed our chances for diplomatic initiatives." Claiming to have been pressing Hizballah actively to "leave the matter to me," he expressed deep annoyance that Hizballah had decided to retaliate for Rahil's death. The Ambassador noted that Hizballah insists on having the ability to veto what Siniora decides but reserves the right to drag Lebanon into war without reference to Siniora. Agreeing, Siniora said that he did not concur with some stories circulating around Beirut, that Hizballah leadership and Nasrallah in particular were surprised by the firing into Sheba'a Farms. Siniora thought that the shelling of Sheba'a Farms had been too carefully calibrated and then too easily turned off to have been carried out by dissident, radical, mid-ranking Hizballah fighters.

RAHIL, A SUNNI, WAS
NOT A HIZBALLAH OPERATIVE

¶19. (C) The Ambassador asked Siniora for his candid analysis of Ibrahim Rahil: was he really the innocent shepherd claimed by the Lebanese press and the MFA? It seemed strange

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for a sensible shepherd to be herding goats so close to a danger zone. Siniora expressed annoyance with the question. Rahil, he said, was Sunni. The Sunnis do not support or even like Hizballah. He was on his family's land with their full herd of goats and sheep. He was the only son of the Rahil family. There were no indications that he had any aggressive intentions. The Israelis, Siniora said, "should say something to acknowledge they made a mistake." The Ambassador said that Hizballah's actions had destroyed any ability for the international community to press Israel on the matter.

REQUESTS ASSISTANCE ON REDUCING
ISRAELI AIR SPACE VIOLATIONS

¶10. (C) Then "can't you at least concentrate on stopping the air violations?" Siniora asked; "they are killing us -- not literally, of course, but politically!" Saying that he would pass on Siniora's request to Washington, the Ambassador noted that we can get statistics of the air violations for southern Lebanon from UNIFIL. But, he cautioned, as long as the GOL permitted Hizballah to operate freely in southern Lebanon, our ability to curb Israeli overflights in that area is limited. There is a causal relationship between Hizballah's destructive behavior and the Israeli overflights. As for the more provocative flights elsewhere over Lebanon,

UNIFIL does not track them. They are outside of UNIFIL's area of responsibility. Thus, we have no statistics to use, should Washington agree to discuss the matter with the Israelis. Siniora promised to send statistics to the Ambassador of all Israeli overflights in 2005, as monitored by the Ministry of Defense. He urged again that the USG help end Israel's air violations.

WORRIES ABOUT UNIIIC

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked Siniora about the relations between the new UNIIIC Commissioner, Serge Brammertz, and the GOL. Fine, Siniora answered, although Brammertz "strikes me as too clinical, too technical." Moreover, Siniora said, Belgian Ambassador Stephane de Loecker "talks too much." It is perhaps natural that Brammertz shares some of his thinking with his fellow Belgian, but de Loecker, suddenly feeling that, "probably for the first time," he has information of some importance in Lebanon, is trying to show people how much he knows. (As an aside at this point, Siniora turned to his advisor and neice, Rola Nouredine, and said, in Arabic, "ask the Belgian Ambassador to come me this afternoon.") The Ambassador asked the PM what he had heard. "Disturbing things," Siniora responded, suggesting that, according to the stories being circulated by de Loecker, Brammertz was questioning everything that happened before his arrival, even the arrests of the four Lebanese generals. Siniora reported that he would try to see Brammertz before Brammertz' travel to New York on 2/7, in order to remind Brammertz of the need to keep rumors in check and to sensitize him on the impact anything he says or does has on Lebanese politics.

CABINET DEBATES GENERAL PARAMETERS FOR INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL

¶12. (C) Noting that the GOL is expected to follow up UN/OLA Nicolas Michel's trip (ref b) to Lebanon by deploying a team to UN headquarters in New York, the Ambassador asked whether Siniora had done any more thinking about an international tribunal for Hariri assassination suspects. Siniora said that several parameters had been discussed and agreed upon by the 18 ministers (out of 24 -- besides the five Shia, Defense Minister Elias Murr was absent for medical issues) who attended the 2/2 cabinet session:

- The tribunal must be held outside Lebanon.
- Lebanese law should be applied, with some modifications. The modifications would include suspension of the death penalty and, in terms of process, using an Anglo-Saxon system of a prosecutor.
- The majority of the judges must be non-Lebanese.
- The "chairman" of the judges must be non-Lebanese.
- The prosecutor must be non-Lebanese.

PM RULES OUT LOCKERBIE MODEL, ASKS FOR UNSC TO CREATE TRIBUNAL

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¶13. (C) Siniora said that he will meet with Minister of Justice Charles Rizk on 2/6 to determine the composition of the 2-3 member team, all judges, to travel to New York to continue discussions with Michel and his team. They will carry the parameters above, in order to focus the discussion. The Ambassador asked whether he and Rizk, given Rizk's alliance with President Lahoud, would be able to decide on a single, unified team. Of course, the PM responded. Referring to the parameters the team will carry to New York, the Ambassador asked whether it wouldn't be better to consider a formula by which the tribunal was much more Lebanese in character and flavor, given that the crime took place in Lebanon against Lebanon's most prominent citizen. Wouldn't a Lockerbie model be more appropriate, given that

such a model would show faith in the Lebanese judicial process and reinforce the need for the Lebanese to take responsibility for their own decisions? Siniora ruled out a Lockerbie model categorically. Judges would fear for their families' safety and would not be brave enough to convict anyone linked to Syrian or Lebanese security forces. Listing the possibilities outlined by Michel, the Ambassador asked Siniora what vehicle might create, legally, the international tribunal. It can only be UNSC action, Siniora said; it would "tear Lebanon apart" to expect Lebanese parliamentary action.

HAMAS VICTORY MEANS MORE IRANIAN POWER,
AND MORE HAMAS PRESENCE IN LEBANON

¶14. (C) The PM asked the Ambassador for the USG views on Hamas' electoral victory. The Ambassador repeated U.S. policy about what Hamas must do to be accepted as a legitimate partner. Siniora gave a rather lengthy analysis of Hamas' victory, urging the USG to "give them the patience and the understanding and the leeway they need to adapt themselves; don't give them excuses." The Ambassador asked Siniora what the impact would be of the Hamas victory in Lebanon. "It adds another dimension to our problems," he responded. "The Iranian arc" is getting "bigger and stronger." Iran will fill the vacuum in supporting the Palestinians, meaning that Iran now has a growing circle of assets: Iraq, Syria, Hizballah, and the Palestinian territories. Even though Hamas is a relatively insignificant player in Lebanon, its electoral victories and its links to Iran "improve the chances of Hamas expansion in Lebanon."

PM WORRIED THAT BY-ELECTION COULD
INCREASE TENSIONS, TURN VIOLENT

¶15. (C) Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad joined the meeting as it was coming to a close. She turned the subject to the Baabda-Aley by-elections needed to fill the seat vacated by the death of Lebanese Forces MP Edmond Naim. Sitt Nayla told the PM that the March 14 coalition had to decide whether to use the elections to weaken Michel Aoun or try to make him more cooperative. In Sitt Nayla's view, if the March 14 coalition and Aoun backed separate candidates, Aoun's Christian base would be appalled by his electoral alliance with Hizballah. So, even if the March 14 coalition lost the seat to Aoun's candidate, Aoun would be weakened nationally by the experience. Sitt Nayla indicated that she favored such a strategy.

¶16. (C) But, Siniora responded, the Christians, too, would be weakened, split between two candidates. The PM said that he strongly believed that there must be a single, compromise candidate, acceptable to both Aoun and the March 14 majority. The situation in Lebanon was too tense for a bitter electoral fight. The Shia and Druse in Baabda-Aley, aware of the Nasrallah-Jumblatt disputes, might enter into open conflict. The Christian split between Michel Aoun's backers and those of Samir Ja'ja' could also turn violent. It is in everyone's interest, the PM insisted, to use the Baabda-Aley elections to calm down tensions, not increase them. Sitt Nayla said that she agreed in principle but did not see anyone who would fit the bill as a compromise candidate. The PM's choice -- former MP Salah Honein -- would be rejected by Aoun as too close to Jumblatt, even though Jumblatt dismissed him from his slate in the 2005 elections. "We have to try to find someone," Siniora repeated. "We can't afford a fight." (Note: Siniora got a different sort of fight -- an ominous one -- the day after this meeting, when Sunni rioters torched the Danish Consulate and attacked Christian property in Beirut. We will discuss the riots septel. End note.)

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